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## CURRENT OPINION

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### Miracles and Christian Theism

Belief in the activity of a divine Providence working in the world is most effectively defended by pointing to the spiritual activities mediated through men. This is the contention of Reverend Professor G. W. Wade, of St. David's College, Lampeter, in the October *Hibbert Journal*. It is clear from our Lord's discourses, as proved in the earliest records of them, that it was not by miracles that he chiefly sought to appeal to men.

Comparison between Mark and the other synoptists (Luke and Matthew) who used his gospel as a source shows that even though the latter had a written document before them, they did not hesitate to diverge from it. So it may be inferred that where a writer had no written source to draw upon, but merely oral narratives (as was almost certainly the case with Mark), his divergences from the original tradition would be at least as great. And secondly, inasmuch as not only the apostles but the reporters of their testimony lived in an age and land which had a very different conception of natural law from that prevailing now, their explanation of a marvelous event could not fail to vary from any that would be given by scientific observers at the present time. If we attempt to realize the conditions of mind under which the earliest gospel narratives were framed, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that they favored the production of miracle stories. It is clear from an examination of the Old Testament that the writers of it classed as miracles many events that we should consider due to the normal operation of natural forces; and there is no reason to doubt that the Jews of our Lord's day shared the same tendency.

At the present time, when the objections felt to miracles from the side of science are

reinforced by the doubts arising from criticism, it seems unwise to lay stress upon the miracles as the chief bulwark against materialism. Those who have come to think that the miracles did not occur are not precluded thereby from retaining a spiritual faith, or from believing that God really influences and controls his world.

### The Need of Franker Preaching

Under the caption "The Unreality of Much Current Religious Teaching," Professor J. A. Lindsay, M.D., in the *Contemporary Review* for September, writing from the point of view of no one denomination, but "after a somewhat extensive experience of religious teachers in Ireland and other countries," speaks of the attitude assumed by many cultivated people toward religion and of the conviction entertained by not a few that the pulpit is behind the age, that its point of view is in some important particulars obsolete, that it has not yet assimilated the accumulated fruits of science and of historical criticism, and that it cannot exercise its due influence until it has adjusted itself to the new conditions. There is, the writer feels, an increasing wave of agnosticism as men of good will, genuinely interested in their fellows and in humanitarian effort, turn increasingly away from questions which they are convinced lead nowhere and admit of no solution. If religion at the present day is impeded or discredited by any imperfect adjustment to the modern intellectual environment, it cannot be wrong to call attention to the fact. If such a contention is unfounded or uncharitable, disproof will be easy.

A plea is made for more reality in dealing with questions which are on the plane of knowledge, which can be proved or disproved—questions, in short, with regard to which it is imperative that religious teach-

ing should not conflict with the best that is thought and known. In several particulars, the teaching of the average pulpit today too often has about it the note of unreality. Verbal inspiration, repudiated in name, is maintained in essence, and the whole Bible taken as the Word of God *sans phrase*, and where inconsistencies are apparent the authorized exponents of religion, in their half-belief, too often give to the whole subject of biblical authority a fatal unreality. Too large a proportion of the clergy possess capacity of holding incompatible beliefs at one and the same time. In the current teaching also regarding the order of nature, the origin of man, the nature of man—in the so-called doctrine of “human depravity” which still colors religious thought—there is far too much paltering with the assured results of science, too much clinging to obsolete cosmogonies, and the sure result is fatal unreality. Likewise, in the current teaching on the subject of the interpretation of history and the course of civilization, too much is exclusively claimed for the influence of the Christian religion, little or no account being taken of the large application to life of the fruits of scientific research. The case of the New Japan is a case in point. Further, there is unreality in much current religious teaching under the subject of the alien faiths of the world, in the attempt to underestimate the virtues of the “heathen” and to picture them in darkest terms. Christianity has no reason to shun comparison with any other of the great faiths of the world; it can afford to be just to them.

Professor Lindsay recognizes that while his remarks may not do justice to the more advanced religious teachers of our day, they do too truly represent the average religious attitude of the church. But even the advanced religious teachers are too much afraid that frankness would “unsettle men’s minds.” But the number of these who are dissatisfied with conventional theology and petrified creeds and who are looking for a

restatement of Christian doctrine is larger than is often supposed and is constantly increasing. Men are impatient of evasion, of platitude, and of mere dogmatic assertion. Religion suffers at present from an ever-haunting sense of insecurity and unreality. The present chaotic condition of religious thought and teaching is a source of fatal weakness. A restatement of the Christian position has become necessary.

### **Why Cannot the Kingdom Come?**

Dr. Washington Gladden in the *Metho-dist Quarterly Review* for October calls attention to the fact that the rate of growth of the churches has been lessening somewhat rapidly of late in most of the denominations on both sides of the sea. The churches gained during the first fifty years of the last century four times as fast as they gained during the second half of the century, to quote Dr. Josiah Strong. Of these untoward conditions the most disturbing feature is the increasing alienation of the wage-workers from the church; the army of organized labor is largely outside the churches and not in friendly relation to them. This number probably includes some thirty millions. The church cannot permanently maintain any position of influence in the community if it is out of sympathy with this class.

Why has there been this retarding of the numerical growth of the church and this alienation of the wage-worker? To say that it is due to indifference of men today to the call of the higher life or to the growth of materialism is simply to say that the church has failed to do the work for which she was empowered. Has not the church a gospel to preach that softens the strong heart and awakens the consciousness of need and kindles the enthusiasm of humanity? Various excuses are offered which are not so much explanations of her fruitlessness as proofs of her delinquency. If divisions have incapacitated the church,

why these divisions? They are themselves symptoms showing grievous lack of vitality. The disease is constitutional, organic. The religious idea by which the church has been trying to shape its life is a defective idea. To be sure, there has always been more of living than of dead tissue in the body of Christ, and there is today; but there is always much that is not vitalized. The church's divisions are not only sources of weakness but *signs* of weakness: it is not only weak because it is divided, but it is divided because it is weak. The loss of the great social ideal of the kingdom of God and the substitution of a self-regarding temper and habit for the spirit of the community is the source of our sectarian divisions. The spirit of individualism is strife and social disintegration; it stimulates the ambition of leadership to which the origin and maintenance of sects is mainly due. The love of money—the root of all our social evils—is egoism in its most concrete and condensed expression. The church by concentrating the attention of the individual upon his own interests has been helping to produce the culture medium in which that absorbing passion is developed. The church must get a new conception of what is fundamental in Christianity, a new appeal to the conscience of men; it must recover its lost social ideal which for many centuries the builders have rejected and make it the headstone of the corner.

The movement toward church federation is very promising, but for church federation to be real and permanent the church must get a clear understanding of the reasons why it is not already united. It must have a new heart and a new spirit. There must be instilled into the minds of the members of our churches the spirit of the community before there can be any profitable co-operation among them. They must also learn that

religion is something more than the concern of the local church; that any Christian's supreme loyalty belongs to the kingdom, not to the church, not to any or all of the churches. The kingdom is a great deal bigger than the church, and the righteousness of the kingdom is a larger kind of righteousness than the righteousness of the church. It includes all the philanthropic agencies of the community, all its educational agencies; all governmental and civic agencies for the preservation of public welfare; the whole realm of industry and trade; the whole ministry of the beautiful; the ministry of joyfulness; all the people, young and old, rich and poor, good and bad, black and white, native-born and foreign-born—all the people of the community. The federation movement shows that the churches have heard the call of the kingdom. The church on fire with the passion of the kingdom would not be complaining of waning influence or shrinking membership.

Is this visionary? Many, even outside the church, are believing in it. A good many Socialists believe that the kingdom can come; that is why they are growing. To be sure they think that it can be brought in by economic or political machinery, but they believe it can be. Until they find a more excellent way they will never prosper. But they are not wrong in thinking the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Some will complain, saying that this is to "substitute sociology for religion." If so, it is the kind of sociology of which no disciple of Jesus ought to be afraid. "All of us who have been trained in egoistic religion need a conversion to Christian Christianity." We need a brotherhood which will prove the Fatherhood. It is coming. It must come. If we ever doubt it, may God forgive us our faithlessness.